

THE BALL THAT DIDN'T KEEP A SECRET.

(See *Frontispiece.*)

BY GEORGE ADAMS.

IT was in a garret. There was a woman there, and a girl, and a very little girl who lisped, who laughed, who was never idle, who was always hungry. Though she was such a small child she had a long name. It was Wilhelmina—but they called her Mina.

Around the girl and the woman lay scraps of leather, and stout kid, and bright bits of stuff, as bright as the flowers in the dormer-window that nodded and nodded good-morning to the blue sky over head. Shavings were there in a box, and wads of cotton, and many odds and ends for stuffing, for they were making balls for the toy-shop that stood in the next street but one.

It just happened that Mina was hungry at this moment, so the mother, putting down the ball she was stuffing, went into the pantry to cut some bread. Mina stood by the work-table. She had nothing to do, so her busy little brain spoke to her busy little fingers :

"S'pothe you help mamma with that ugly old ball ; it's tho velly ugly ! "

So the busy little fingers seized on something that peeped from beneath a heap of work, directed, and bearing a stamp, and poked and pushed and drove it into the heart of the Ball.

"I don't belong here," it cried, as loud as it knew how. "Take me out ! "

But, as no matter how loud it cried it would never know how to cry loud enough to be heard, it was of no use. Mina ran away, the mother came back and sewed it up with her strong needle and her strong Thread safe into the heart of the Ball.

"How this kid creaks, Gretchen," she said to the older girl.

Gretchen nodded her head.

"That's because it was in the cargo wet with salt water," she said.

But there she was wrong. The Ball was declaring over and over again, as well as it knew how, that it must come to pieces, it *must* come to pieces !

"You will, one of these days," grumbled the Thread,

"as sure as flax is flax, for I'm exceedingly rotten—though I don't look so."

"I'm afraid it will be too late," sighed the Ball, anxiously.

Just then the Letter spoke up for itself :

"I don't mind telling you," it said, "why I am so much put out by the accident which has befallen me. I am expected to carry a message to Mina's brother, who was a wild lad, and ran off to sea five years ago. Now he has written and wants to come back home and be forgiven. He is in a nasty little town not far away waiting for the mother's pardon before he dares come here. If he got no reply, he said, by the end of the week, he would sail away again. You can judge how anxious I feel, shut up here so hopelessly as I am."

The Ball was so deeply affected by what the letter told, that it almost burst ; but the Thread obstinately held on fast and kept it tight.

"What are you about ?" it scolded. "I never saw such a dunce as you are ? Here we are packed in a box ready for the toy-man to carry to his shop ; what good is done by bursting now ? Somebody who unpacks us will throw you out as damaged stock, you'll go to the ash barrel, and the poor woman will have to pay for bad work—and that will be the end of you and your Letter. Let me manage this ; anyone can see you are a bouncing, good-natured creature, without a shred more head than tail."

"In justice to yourselves I must remind you," remarked the Letter, "that when you let me out that is the end of you both."

"O," said the Ball quite simply, "that is understood. But what are we to the happiness or misery of these people ?"

"I have something to tell you," said the Thread, more amiably than it usually spoke. "Once I was a little blue flower in the free fields. I was visited at night by the beautiful dew from the pure upper air, and by day, by the genial sunbeam from the far-up heaven. Sometimes the rain fell, and that had come a long way from the great ocean which touches every

shore of the whole world ; there were many stories told me and much that I learned. Each said — the dew, the sunbeam, the rain — that it was not always what I then saw it. ‘I have not always been so useful, so beautiful, so well-known and loved, but every time I do a good act I change and never change but for the better.’ That was what each one said. May it not be so with everything? If, then, we strive to give up the Letter, that may not be the end of us, but quite the contrary.”

“I am sure I should have done it quite the same,” said the Ball humbly, “though I didn’t know that before.”

“No one expected you did,” retorted the Thread.

“Relations should not disagree,” remarked the Letter, “and I have discovered we are related.

“Ah, hardly,” said the Ball ; “my parentage is humble. I came from the hot low fields far in the south, where the dark African tills the burning ground beneath a burning sun, and the fresh green plants thrive and grow until the bud peeps between the leaves, swells and swells, and bursts with a little noise, while the soft white cotton, like a filmy smoke, rises and falls gently hanging. From such a plant I came, and that is an humble birth.”

“Not so bad,” said the Thread, condescendingly. “Still, cotton is not linen, everyone will confess. I have very fine relations — even in king’s palaces, and my family is very old.”

The Ball knew nothing of kings’ palaces, so it cared no more than if the Thread had substituted fishermen’s huts — which it might have done with equal truth.

“I am not exactly linen,” said the Letter, “although I have a good deal of it in my veins ; at least, I am descended from that stock, and from the cotton, too. I am a further remove than either of you ; but all impurities have been pressed, and pressed, and pressed out of me. *My* relatives have done great things ; they have shown heroes, kings, princes in their true light to the world ; they have taken charge of noble words and high trusts. The Declaration of Independence is in my family keeping.”

The Ball felt its heart glow with pride at finding such a connection. It was a true patriot, for its colors were red, white, and blue. “That charge,” it cried, “is the greatest in the world! I would die to preserve it, if it were mine — oh, be careful of it, be careful of it !”

“Hush,” said the Thread. “Here we are. Now

do what I tell you, but nothing more.”

They had arrived at the toy shop and were being unpacked.

In the meanwhile, at the house the mother was clearing away the day’s work.

“Gretchen,” she asked, anxiously, “did you mail the letter at once, as I told you ?”

“Did I ?” repeated the girl. She was pinning a ribbon at her neck, and turning her head now this way, now that, to see how it looked, for she was pretty



THE BALL’S LAST EFFORT.

and knew it ; “why, I suppose so. If it is not there, I must have.”

“Oh, Gretchen,” said the mother, reproachfully, “to speak so carelessly of such a letter as that !”

“I have no memory,” said the girl, uneasily, “how can I help it ? Of course I took it if it isn’t there.” And she came herself to turn over the work on the table. “Oh, yes, of course I did,” she repeated.

“Will brother Max come back ?” cried Mina, wonderingly.

“He will come back, thank God !” whispered the

mother, catching the child to her breast, "perhaps tonight."

But that night he did not come, nor the next, and there remained but one to close the week.

"How long have we now?" inquired the Ball of the Letter. "My heart is heavy with keeping this secret—how much time is left us?"

"One day," sighed the Letter, "and I am so cramped in this position I fear I never can unfold again."

"Don't mind that now," said the Ball, "we must act." With that he tumbled off the shelf, and rolled out into the middle of the toy-shop floor.

"I didn't tell you to do that," exclaimed the Thread, angrily, "I wasn't prepared! Here is one stitch of me gone! Who ever thought of your doing such a rash thing!"

The Ball said nothing. It had so little to say for for itself, had listened so quietly to everyone else, had observed so much, it had learned to trust its own judgment.

A little boy stood by his father's side. It was at his feet the Ball had thrown itself with a gay, enticing spring and roll. The boy cried out with delight, and begged for it; so when he left the shop he carried the Ball in his hand.

As they left the city, and the cars carried them swiftly towards the little town by the sea where every house smelt of bilge-water, and where when the tide was high the sea itself delighted to hide in small, dusky pools in many low, dark cellars, the Thread informed the Letter and the Ball that the father was a sailor. The Ball knew it already, for it had seen that for itself before it tumbled from the shelf.

They went into a narrow street and the child, with other children, began to play. He threw the Ball against a house and, it sprang so high and airily, up, down! down, up! only a touch on the rough stones, into his hands! only a spurring leap from the hard bricks, into his hand! All the children in the street shouted.

"I am going fast," said the thread, breathlessly. "One or two more such leaps as yours, and I won't be two whole stitches. I wouldn't burst on the ground — the children can't read."

"No — the children will only tear me to pieces," said the Letter — it, too, was breathless and excited. "I shall never reach the post if you burst here."

"I see a window," said the Ball, cheerily. "Some one is inside — a little effort and I can spring through. Will you both be ready?"

"We will try," answered the Thread and the Letter.

"Good-bye, my friends," said the Ball, tenderly, and then leaped high and sprang within the window. As it fell to the floor the Thread gave way, the Ball burst, the Letter thrust a large, agitated corner into sight.

The young man who sat on the side of his bed, his head drooped dejectedly in his thin hand (for he had been ill) started. What lay at his feet?

Only a soiled, a useless, broken toy.

He stooped and picked it up, turning it in his hand while his thoughts wandered sadly to the home which, unpardoned as he was, he was this time to leave behind him forever. The warm tears fell slowly down his cheeks.

"I have made some money," he thought, "and I hoped it would be easier for the poor hard worked mother, and Gretchen, and little Mina — she was a baby when I last saw her. What have I now to live for? But I have deserved it. I have never been a good son."

Now he noticed the sharp, clean edge of an envelope where an envelope was never meant to be. He pulled it out with an absent mind. The writing caught his eye. "It is hers!" he cried. "The name is mine! It is the address I gave her."

With that he tore the Letter open, devoured hungrily with his eyes the words of love and pardon, and fell upon his knees sobbing and thanking God.

And what became of the Ball?

It was thrown into the street and lay in the gutter; was swept by a heavy rain down the sewer and carried into the heaving bay; was cast up, a toy of the waves; was thrown upon the level, sandy beach. And now some part floats a mote in the sunbeam; some part falls in the dew; some part has become a happy, graceful flower; some part on the ocean billows sweeps distant shores; and to-day some part pours silent blessings from that white cloud which drifts idly in the high, blue air, far above your head.